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Saint Nicholas Society
of the City of New York

Established February 28, 1835

Speech by
Major E. Gibert Schermerhorn
at the
Ninety-sixth Anniversary Dinner
Paas Festival
Hotel Biltmore, April 6, 1931

HON. EDWARD RIDLEY FINCH, *Presiding Justice of the Supreme Court, and President of Saint Nicholas Society, Presiding.*

If your Honor pleases—Gentlemen of the Jury—

In presenting this Historical Tabloid—I sincerely trust your verdict will not be

"Warden do your duty." (WARDEN LEWIS E. LAWES being present as a speaker.)

Gentlemen of Saint Nicholas Society, ninety-six years ago Philip Hone wrote in his diary as follows:

"I attended a dinner last night given by the Saint Nicholas Society. I don't think they will have another."

Why was Hone's prophecy wrong?

Because we have kept the faith with God, and our forebears, who were present at the birth of our City, carried its books to school, cast its first ballot, and wished it Godspeed as a State of the Union.

Our President has asked me to tell you something of our history and our customs. That as time goes along we do not stray from them or allow innovations to creep in, destroying our background.

In Watson's Historic Tales, written at the time, this is stated: "We are glad to witness the rise of feelings among the Dutch descendants, tending to cherish, by anniversary remembrances, the love and reverence they owe to their sires"—this referred to the Saint Nicholas Society.

In what is this Society distinctive? Many think we are strictly a Dutch society. We are not!

I make much of this point because I have heard it said, "Oh! My ancestors were not Dutch!."

We are a Society of Old New Yorkers without reference to National Origin, Race or Creed.

Admission to the Society requires two things—that the applicant be of good repute and shall have an ancestor resident in the City or State prior to 1785.

Why, then, do we have a Dutch flavor?

Because tribute is ever to the elder, and the Dutch were first; secondly, due entirely to the wisdom of Washington Irving.

Irving saw, and with that keen foresight which he possessed, knew, that a society, based upon the Dutch people, representing as they do and did, honor, loyalty, hospitality, sociability and courage—the five cardinal points of a gentleman—that so long as we of Saint Nicholas adhered to these principles we could not fail, nor could we cease to exist.

It was at a dinner given to Irving, by the merchants of the City, on his return from abroad where he had been for seventeen years, that Irving called attention to the fact that while there were present, as guests, representatives of German, English, Scotch and Irish Societies, there was no Society of Old New Yorkers. Washington Irving was most proud of New York, and had been provoked by the appearance some years before of a hand-book most inaccurate, which bore the inscription:

"A Picture of New York by One of its Citizens."

He therefore decided to write a history of his own, because, to his surprise, in criticising this hand-book, he found so many of his friends who knew nothing about its early days.

At first it was to be a serious tale, but he became interested in the humor and dramatic situation of the Dutch period and determined to write a burlesque. He little dreamed that in advertising his work he would give to the City a character by which it would be known.

Here is the advertisement which governs that character: "Left his dwelling and has not been heard of since, a small elderly gentleman, dressed in a black coat and a cocked hat, by the name of Knickerbocker."

And that History of New York by Dietrick Knickerbocker was published by strange coincidence on December 6, 1807, Saint Nicholas Day, 124 years ago.

Our Patron Saint

Saint Nicholas was chosen as our Patron Saint because the First Church in the City was dedicated to Saint Nicholas, and for the fact he was the Patron Saint of sailors. Not because he was the

Patron Saint of Holland, because he was not! He was the Patron Saint of Belgium, whence came our first settlers, the Walloons.

Our Windmills

Came from the City Seal of 1686, not as some think that it was suggested by the coat of arms of the Van Cortlandts. However, it was because the prosperity of the City depended upon the grinding of flour as providing the most important adjunct to their living and because it was the first actual product of New Amsterdam.

Our Weather-cock

The "Weather-cock" we have, which was presented to the Society, came from the City Hall, then on Wall Street. Irving obtained it at the time the City Hall, which stood on the corner of Nassau and Wall Streets, was demolished, and the Custom House was built in its place, Irving's office being across the street at the time it was taken down, and the New City Hall was built in City Hall Park. It did not come from the Stadt Huys that had a weather-vane. Nor did it come from Sunny Side—Irving's home. Of this weather-cock, Irving wrote to Governeur Kemble:

"Speaking of Sunny Side—The cupola has no other use, or purpose, and is about as useful as a feather in one's hat, though, by-the-way, it has its purpose, for it supports a weather-cock brought from Holland by Gill Davis (the King of Coney Island), who says he got it from the windmill in Rotterdam, which windmill has been mentioned in Knickerbocker. I hope, therefore, I may be permitted to wear my feather—this was 1847." So he hardly would have presented that one to the Society in 1848.

The Cocked Hat

About the year 1740 it was the custom to fasten the right or left side of the brim to the crown either by a ribbon or a buckle. This was called "cocking the hat", and as the ribbon or buckle aided in cocking the hat, it became known as the cockade.

In the year 1752 it became the custom to wear enormous wigs, so large in fact that a hat could not be worn. However, as certain customs or ceremonies required a hat it had to be carried. Whereupon for the English and French the triangular cocked hat came into being, the Dutch still clinging to the Beaver or so-called sugar loaf hat.

It rightfully belongs to the Saint Nicholas Society because it was mentioned as part of the attire of Father Knickerbocker, and because it was the badge of a Continental Soldier, and worn by General Washington and his officers upon their entry into the City in 1783. I know of no reason for the bow of Orange on the back of

our President's Hat, and in view of the fact that after a hearty Saint Nicholas Dinner of those elder days, its triangular shape gave no particular information to the direction intended to be taken,—I must object to it.

Our Pipes

Gentlemen, no symbol and no custom, we have so accurately symbolizes the Saint Nicholas Society. Tobacco was unknown in Europe until Columbus carried it to Spain, Sir Walter Raleigh to England, and the Dutch sailors to Holland.

The custom of smoking pipes did not originate in Holland; in fact, the first sailors were arrested who smoked pipes in the streets of Amsterdam because they were feared as witches because of the smoke and fire issuing from their mouths.

The long stemmed pipe, known as the Church Warden, or our own Saint Nicholas Pipe, is the evolution of the Indian Calumet with its long stem. The custom ever was to carry these pipes safely home to the Goede Vrouw, that he may have an alibi, and she the evidence thereof. Why this is abandoned I know not. Has this custom been Volsteadized?

The Calumet or pipe of peace, than which no greater symbol exists, representing, to those with whom it was smoked, confidence, trust, and protection. In any Indian conference a seated circle was formed, the Chief lighted his Calumet, and it was passed from hand to hand around the circle and those within that circle understood that any idea of harm was suspended between those who sat there.

Later, when the Early New Yorker built unto himself an house he improved the Dutch style of architecture by the addition of a "stoop" whereon he, after the toils of the day, could be seated, surrounded by the family circle and enjoy its consoling comfort, the smoke thereof "encircling his head like a wreath."

It is this ancient old New York custom that we of the Saint Nicholas Society continue evidencing, that while seated in with us our guests are heartily welcome to enjoy with us the peace, sociability, and comfort of our family circle.

In conclusion I quote from an anonymous poem published in 1835:

"Old Pearl, I knew, a pleasant quiet street,
Snug houses and neat stoops, where friends would often meet,
The men with pipes, cock'd hats and fine long queues,
The girls with white short gowns, stuff petticoats and high-heeled shoes:
My time is limited, and I
Must bid my ancient friends good bye;
I came to celebrate the day
And to our Saint my homage pay."